

# McCain vs. Obama Using the 10-Factor Candidate Assessment Scorecard

By Lou Adler, September 2008

*Note: this article has raised some controversy. Feel free to comment on [Lou's Recruiters Roundtable blog](#).*

In my book, *Hire With Your Head* (John Wiley & Sons, 3rd Edition, 2007), I introduced the idea of using an evidence-based assessment process when evaluating and comparing candidates. This is based on using ten factors that have been shown to accurately predict on-the-job success, and on having the hiring team rank each one in a group meeting on a 1-5 scale after the interviews are completed. [Click here for a sample of the form](#) we use for staffing and middle-management positions. I thought it would be interesting to use this 10-Factor Scorecard to evaluate who would make a better President, Obama or McCain.

A little background will help here on understanding how the evaluation should be used. First, each of the ten factors is based on a comparison to real job needs. This is not the job description which lists skills and experiences, but rather a performance profile which describes what the person must do and accomplish to be considered successful in the job. Second, since the [performance profile](#) for the President of the United States is dependent upon your political viewpoint, you'll naturally come up with different results based on your view of the problems and solutions facing the country. Regardless, using the 10-Factor Scorecard will help you determine how well qualified your choice of candidate is to handle the job as you see it. And if you're in the middle you'll be better able to determine whether McCain or Obama is the best choice for you. (For the sake of full disclosure, my rankings below are based on me being pretty much an independent, somewhat conservative on business and economic issues, and moderate on social issues.)

As you grade each factor, it's important to understand the 1-5 ranking system. Specifically:

**Level 1.0:** Not competent, capable, or interested.

**Level 2.0:** Competent to handle the basic needs of the job, but needs extra training, supervision, or motivation to meet key job needs. (Considered a C- hire.)

**Level 2.5:** Average performance in comparison to real job needs. (Considered a C+ to B- hire.)

**Level 3.0:** Meets the major performance objectives of the job consistently, professionally, and at a high quality level. (This would be considered a B or B+ type hire.)

**Level 4.0:** Based on the performance expectations for the job, consistently does more, better, or faster. (This would be considered an A- type hire.)

**Level 5.0:** Far exceeds the core needs of the job on a consistent basis. Takes the job to an unexpected and far higher level. (This would be considered an A to A+ hire.)

With this grading scale let's start the 10-factor comparison.

1. **Competencies and Skills.** This refers to the technical knowledge the person possesses in comparison to real job needs. A 2.5 ranking on this factor means the person has average skills and motivation, or the person is light on skills, but with a high ability to learn.

On a basic level I'm not convinced that Obama has all of the current skills needed to handle world affairs, allow the U.S. to become energy independent, handle the complex military issues involved in the job, and has the depth of knowledge needed to handle global and domestic economic policy. McCain seems to have a better grasp of the military, energy and international issues, but I think they have the same level of understanding of economics, which is too low in my mind for either of them to be qualified. There is no question in my mind that Obama has more upside on the economic understanding side, but this is ranked under Factor 10: Potential, so he gets no credit here for that. On this factor, I give the edge to McCain. He scores a Level 3.5 in my book, with Obama barely getting a Level 2.5. For Obama fans, I know this is harsh, but I just don't believe he has the executive level skills required for the job. Given his lack of experience, I would not present Obama as a potential

candidate, if I was given the search assignment to find the President of the United States. However, on this basis McCain probably wouldn't make the cut, either.

2. **Motivation to Do the Work Required.** Assessing motivation to do the work requires an understanding of real job needs plus an evaluation of the candidate's past performance in handling similar type work. I rank both candidates extremely high on this factor. They've both demonstrated an ability to work around-the-clock for causes they believe in. However, I'm concerned about McCain's health and endurance, so I'd give the edge to Obama on this one: 5.0 to 4.5.
3. **Team Leadership.** This factor addresses the candidate's ability to select, motivate, and develop a team of outstanding people. One could dispute my rankings here, but there's no question Obama has the ability to motivate supporters and select highly qualified advisors. It's less obvious if he will take their advice and make the necessary decisions. I question both candidates' choice of running mates, but as of now, I like McCain's less than Obama's. Governor Palin does not seem like a wise choice for me. It seems more politically-based than performance-based. Biden's a safe choice, albeit uninspiring. I have some concern about McCain's ability to build a world-class team of advisors, given the Phil Graham problem. On this factor, I give Obama a solid Level 4 and McCain a solid Level 3.
4. **Problem-Solving Ability.** This refers to the candidate's ability to figure out the causes of typical job-related problems likely to be faced on the job, the ability to articulate a vision of how to solve the problem, and then putting together a comprehensive plan-of-action. Judgment, intelligence, and insight all fall within this factor. However, a person's point-of-view will dramatically affect your ranking here. If you believe Obama's liberal agenda will work, you'll give him a Level 4 or better here. However, I believe it lacks substance and logic at the detail level. Worse, it doesn't fit my economic viewpoint of how to maximize the country's growth for all groups. Despite this misgiving, I need to give him a 3.5 on this factor for his ability to visualize a problem and put together a rough plan. On the McCain side, I believe he can handle a broader variety of problems he'll be faced with on the job, particularly achieving energy independence, handling global affairs, and handling the economy appropriately, so I need to give him a Level 4 here. (Note: I recognize my bias here.)
5. **Achievement of Comparable Results.** This is one of the most important factors in our ranking system. It's based on a track record of delivering results. Using our [Performance-based Interview](#) process we examine major accomplishments in detail, examine the trend of these accomplishments over time, and then compare them to the performance needs of the job. Even if both candidates were equally strong on this factor, if you have a different understanding of real job needs, you'd rank your candidate much higher than the other.

In this case to be fair, the comparison needs to be made on each candidate's past performance in meeting their party's agenda. On this basis you'd have to rank Obama low on the major issues (i.e., energy, crossing the aisle, international affairs, the economy, managing a budget, etc.), since he does not have any track record here. On the philosophic decision issues (i.e., selecting judges, funding for stem cells, etc.), you can rank him high if you agree with him and low if you don't. McCain's track record is much better on the performance issues, but certainly not perfect. While he's never held a comparable executive position, he does have some relevant military experience. However, other than holding a real executive position as Governor of Alaska, I rank Palin comparable to Obama on the performance comparison. As an independent, I rank McCain a 3.5 on this factor overall and Obama a 2.5, due to his lack of a track record of performance.

Over the years I've noticed a "rookie risk" factor whenever someone is given a job way above their current level of performance, despite the intellectual capacity to do the work. While top people can articulate a vision, without a track record of past comparable performance, there is a high degree of failure. There are just too many things that can go wrong when someone hasn't experienced and successfully dealt with similar issues. It's

comparable to putting a great MBA professor in charge of a business. This point is fully explored in Bossidy and Charan's book, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*.

This is the primary reason I'm very concerned with Obama. As an appropriate example, consider Abraham Lincoln's first few years in office. He couldn't convince Robert E. Lee to command the Union forces, he couldn't solve the secession problem diplomatically, he had a terrible war plan, he couldn't find a competent general for three years, hundreds of thousands of soldiers died needlessly, and he wouldn't take the advice of his security advisors not to go out in public on that fateful day in April, 1865. Despite Lincoln's successes, in my opinion many of these rookie mistakes could have been avoided with a more seasoned executive in charge, achieving the same overall outcome more smoothly.

6. **Organization, Planning, and Management.** For an executive-level position this factor involves ensuring that operating and strategic plans are met, budgets are negotiated and achieved, organizations are designed to be effective, and accountability is the watchword. Philosophically I rank McCain higher than Obama on this factor. However, Obama's ability to build a nationwide political team, raise enormous amount of money, mobilize a huge portion of the electorate, conduct a world-class convention, and get nominated for the Presidency is proof that he is strong on this factor. Overall, McCain's campaign seems a bit disorganized. Also, I'm not convinced that running an effective national campaign like Obama has is transferable to running a country. Based on these points, I'm giving Obama a Level 3.5 on this factor, and McCain a Level 3.0.
7. **Trend of Growth over Time.** Examining results over time reveals upward growth, but these need to be compared to the actual needs of the job. We expect a top performer to show significant growth in a short period of time, taking on bigger comparable job-related assignments, and performing successfully. While the job-related accomplishments are thin for Obama, the growth is fast. Despite this, his academic performance, rapid rise in politics, and a successful campaign are indicators of high potential. Regardless, since the track record is short, you couldn't give him any more than 3.0 on this factor if you're an independent. McCain has a strong senate track record, but from an accomplishment perspective, his military growth seems adequate, but he wouldn't be considered a fast-tracker. Overall, I'll give him a 3.5 on this factor. However, on this same factor, Palin should also be considered a fast-tracker, but it's still way too much of a leap to handle the Presidency.
8. **Cultural Fit and Style.** This factor represents a combination of a lot of variables, including how the person's style fits within the organization, their approach and speed of decision-making, working with others, and overall pace and intensity. This is a pretty tough one to evaluate since the President brings much of his own style to the job. However, I tend to prefer McCain's decisiveness and maverick style in getting results over Obama's academic approach. I've placed many top strategy thinkers, and they do not perform as well long-term in line roles over those who can execute and achieve results. I think in a crisis Obama will be too slow to act. However, this will be neutralized longer term, since he'll probably do a better job of putting a strong organization in place. Getting things done requires tough decision making, frequently without all of the information necessary. So, taking everything into account, I'm giving the edge to McCain with a 4.0 ranking, and Obama just a 3.0 on this factor.
9. **Character and Values.** This factor involves the critical issues like ethics, honesty, social values, family, faith, morals, and judgment. For this job, and both candidates, I'm going to assume the best and worst. I assume both candidates are honest within their family and social units, but both are ambitious politicians, so their ability to buck the party line is what I'm using to evaluate them on this factor. For Obama I'm still concerned about the Rev. Wright and William Ayres issues. He also has voted 97% on all Democratic issues. For McCain, I'm disappointed that he caved in to Bush after the 2000 elections, and for his selection of Sarah Palin for his running mate - for me she's too extreme on the social issues. To me these are politics-as-usual decisions, but I guess that's the kind of stuff you

have to do to get elected. For me, these negative issues offset McCain's strong pattern of bucking party lines and crossing the aisle. Regardless, on the values/ethics factor, I'm giving both candidates a 2.5 ranking. While only average for the population at large, unfortunately it's pretty good for a politician.

- 10. Overall Potential to Move Up.** For a manager-level position this factor refers to the person's ability to move up one or two management levels or handle more complex business challenges. It's determined largely by the person's trend of growth over time, the ability to logically articulate solutions to complex problems, the capacity to manage and organize teams to achieve success, and their team leadership skills. On this factor I give Obama more long-term upside than McCain, and I believe he does have the potential to be President some day, but not today. There's just too much of a "rookie risk" factor for me to tolerate. Realistically, though, if you're an Obama fan you have no choice, since the McCain/Palin ticket offers you no comfort. If you're okay with his world view, McCain has the potential to be an effective President with the "rookie risk" far less an issue. As an independent, I have to give Obama only a 2.5 on potential to be President today, but a 5.0 to be President in eight years. But it's today's vote that matters. I give McCain a 3.5 on Overall Potential, which is good, but not great.

On this 10-Factor Candidate Assessment Scorecard, from my independent voter's perspective, Obama received 31.5 points (out of 50) vs. McCain's 35.0 points. This, of course, would flip-flop depending on your Republican vs. Democratic leanings. To put everything in perspective, neither of these scores is remarkable. In my search practice a typical strong candidate would score somewhere in the high 30s to low 40s. Regardless of the overall score, we also have some deal-breakers that preclude us from hiring someone. We urge hiring managers to exclude anyone with a 2.0 on any of the 10 factors and look really carefully at the 2.5s (this is average).

Under this basis the "rookie risk" factor is a deal-breaker for me for Obama. If I agreed with his policies, I would only hope that he gets at least a year to put his team in place and get on top of all of the complex issues we're facing before we're hit with some major crisis. On the McCain side, while I don't agree with all of his positions, I can only hope he stays healthy, because I am not comfortable with Palin's social positions. Lieberman would have been my choice for V.P., but I hear this would have crushed the conservative base for McCain.

From a practical standpoint the 10-Factor Candidate Assessment Scorecard is probably not the best tool for judging Presidential candidates - there is just too much variability possible in the scores due to personal biases and political leanings of the one doing the assessment. However, when all 10 factors are compared to the real job needs, it's much easier to put those biases in the parking lot in order to make a more accurate assessment of the candidates. Imagine how much more accurate your own hiring decisions would be if you went through this same type of evaluation process with each candidate. Getting you to that realization was the real point of this article.